
AFRICAN-AMERICAN FAMILY REUNIONS: DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

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Introduction

There is wide public interest in family reunions which are seen as a mechanism for maintaining family connections, with the dispersal of families across the country giving reunions added importance and significance (Berg, 1992; Ninkovich & Brown, 1998; Vargus, 1997a, 1997b). Family reunions may have the capacity to ground people in a sense of place, of home and of family, and provide, if at least briefly, a sense of connection.

Substantial numbers of African Americans engage annually in family reunion activity. Almost half of all travel and 70% of non-business travel made by African Americans is to a family reunion (Bockman, 2000; Hopkinson, 2001; Lund, 2002; Schnedler, 1996). Their popularity is reflected in the numerous African-American family reunion planning books, cookbooks, children's books on the topic of family reunions, African-American reunion websites, and film, literary and artistic works that express the importance of family reunions and ties to kin (Beasley & Carter, 1997; Berg, 1992; Crichton, 1998; Family Reunion Institute, 2001; Lund, 2002; Ninkovich & Brown, 1998; Burroughs, 2001; Denton-Hatten, 1990; Eklof, 1997; Family Reunion Institute, 2001; Howell, 1999; Nelson, 2000; Vargus, 1997a, 1997b; Williams, 2000; National Council of Negro Woman, 1993; Washington, 1991; Tillman, 1997; McKissack & McKissack, 2000; Ringgold, 1993, 1988; Rose & Simmons, 2001). African-American family reunions and celebrations have also garnered a great deal of attention in the popular media (Bockman, 2000; Hopkinson, 2001; Lund, 2002; Schnedler, 1996).

Family reunions are so prevalent that many cities target African-Americans for potential tourism, touting African-American historical tours, essay contests and cultural events in order to draw reunion participants to their cities (American Legacy Magazine, n.d.; Avenue of the Arts, 2001; Nemy, 1992; Faggins, 2000; Jimenez, 2000). The National Institute of Health (NIH) and National Diabetes Education Program (NDEP) have targeted African-American reunions as a mechanism for distributing health information (NIH, 2000a, 2000b, 2002, n.d.). The 'reunion' theme is used specifically in public service announcements on television, radio and print to target African-Americans.

Despite this, “surprisingly little attention has been paid to the distinctive forms and functions of myth and ritual in contemporary middle-class life” (Emory Center for Myth and Ritual in American Life [MARIAL], 2001). The following literature review briefly highlights the literature on African-American family support, provides a review of the definitions and functions of family rituals, and reviews evidence on the importance of rituals in family life. It concludes by examining preliminary evidence regarding the history, structure and functions of African-American reunions.

African-American Families

The extended family has been highlighted as a strength among African-Americans (Aschenbrenner, 1978; Hill, 1972; Hunter & Ensminger, 1992; Littlejohn-Blake & Darling, 1993; Martin & Martin, 1978; McAdoo, 1978, 1982, 1983a, 1983b; Stack, 1974). Such work emphasizes the strong value placed on kin ties, informal adoption, the extended family and children (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1986; Lindblad-Goldberg, 1987). McAdoo (1978, 1982, 1983a, 1983b) has consistently shown that kinship bonds and mutual assistance exist among African-American families across class, geographic location, and family type. Kin networks are a strategic variable in the functioning of African-American families and are “one of the strongest black cultural patterns.” (McAdoo, 1978, p.76).

Families and Ritual

Rituals, which can take a variety of forms, often provide family life with shape and continuity (MARIAL, 2001). Such forms have been most commonly categorized as family celebrations, family traditions, family life cycle events or daily patterned family interactions and routines (Bennett, Wolin, & McAvity, 1988; Roberts, 1988; Wolin & Bennett, 1984).

Rituals have a symbolic form, are often based on a stereotyped or stylized set of interactions, and provide the family with a sense of identity as well as provide meaning to and stabilization of family life (Bennett et al., 1988; Imber-Black & Roberts, 1992; Laird, 1984), “by clarifying expected roles, delineating boundaries within and without the family, and defining rules so that all members know that ‘this is the way our family is.’” (Wolin & Bennett, 1984, p.410)

Functions of Ritual

Five main themes emerge from the literature on the functions of ritual in family life:

Shared family identity & values. Family identity or culture is created and maintained through participation in rituals (Bennett et al., 1988; MARIAL, 2001), which have the ability to provide a sense of shared identity to family members (Bennett et al.,

1988; Fiese, 1992). Celebrating religious events, such as Christmas, for example, serves as a vehicle for the transfer of values.

A forum for intergenerational communication. Rituals are able to provide a “bridge between generations” (Fiese, 1992, p. 151) and help cross the divide between one generation to the next (Bennet, Wolin, & McAvity, 1988). Family rituals are a synchronous activity and allow the family to communicate “to itself about itself, reflecting its interacting family themes.” (Laird, 1984, p.125). Through the transmission of family rules and values, individual members experience the meaning associated with close family ties across generations.

Stability, organization and continuity. Change often becomes more manageable through the use of rituals, as they may act as containers for difficult emotions. The organization around rituals helps provide stability to mediate life transitions or ‘rites of passage’ in families (Laird, 1984; MARIAL, 2001; Rosenthal & Marshall, 1988) as they assist “individuals and groups to deal with change without an accompanying sense of disruption or discontinuity.” (Rosenthal & Marshall, 1988, p.669). For example, funerals and weddings are important rituals as they symbolize important family transitions as well as provide a framework for experiencing change.

Expression of cultural traditions. Rituals enable families to reflect upon time honored traditions related to cultural, religious or ethnic preferences and practices (Davis, 1988; Laird, 1984; Wolin & Bennet, 1984). Families who demonstrate a high level of commitment to rituals are often more connected to the past (Wolin & Bennett, 1984). Such a perspective gives family life connection and meaning. Ritual may also provide for the maintenance and preservation of ethnic identity (Bennett et al., 1988; Rosenthal & Marshall, 1988; Davis, 1988).

Facing oppression. Although not as commonly reported in the literature, it has been argued that rituals offer individuals, families and groups the capacity to face oppression. For example, rituals in the gay and lesbian community serve to celebrate and solidify identity as well as strengthen ability to fight oppression (Manodori, 1998; Markowitz, 1991). There is empirical evidence documenting the importance of participation in family rituals, particularly patterned family interactions (routines such as dinnertime, etc). Some elements of family rituals have been found to be protective factors that keep children from becoming alcoholics (Wolin & Bennett, 1984), have a positive effect on adolescent self-esteem (Fiese, 1992), assist parents in the transition to single-parenthood (Bauer, 2000; Olson & Haynes, 1993), have a positive effect on the school performance in children (Mackey & Greif, 1994; Compan, Moreno, Ruiz, & Pascual, 2002) and facilitate effective parenting (Dennis, 1998). Less empirical work has been done on the effects of participation in family celebrations (Fiese, 1992).

National African-American Reunions and Celebrations

There are many noteworthy national celebrations of African-American families and reunions. Juneteenth, a celebration of African-American achievement and freedom, is practiced in many communities – particularly in the South (Juneteenth, 2002). In Richmond, Virginia the ‘Down Home Family Reunion’ hosts approximately 25,000 people in celebration of African American families. The annual Albion, Michigan Black Family Reunion focuses on a celebration of history, families and community development (Minority Program Services Black Family Institute, n.d.)

This year the National Council of Negro Women sponsored the 17th annual National Black Family Reunion Celebration. This event, inspired by Dr. Dorothy Height, is an explicit attempt to respond to the many difficulties present in current day African-American communities such as drug abuse, HIV and health care disparities. This event, “honors black heritage and culture, and sets the stage for the traditional transfer of knowledge and the revitalization of the Black Community Spirit.” (Billingsley, 1992; Hopkinson, 2001; National Council of Negro Women, 2001). More than 6 million people have attended these conferences since they began in 1986 (Nemy, 1992).

History of African-American Family Reunions

African-American reunions have been traced as far back as emancipation, when reunions were organized by former slaves from a particular area or plantation (Auslander, 2002; Frazier, 1939; Guttman, 1976; Herskovits, 1958). Ex-slaves frequently placed advertisements in newspapers in an attempt to find family members from whom they had been separated (Auslander, 2002). Thus, the elimination of slavery in the south “helped give birth to the reunion.” (Vargus, as quoted in Lund, 2002). “Then, after emancipation – you had people wanting to find each other,” trying to find both blood kin as well as “men and women who had acted as surrogate parents to them on the plantation,” thus extending the notion of ‘family’ beyond blood (Vargus, as quoted in Lund, 2002). This pattern of including ‘non-blood’ or fictive kin appears to persist in current African-American family reunions (Criswell, 2000-2004). Fictive kin is usually defined as individuals who are treated like relatives but who are not related by blood or marriage (Chatters, Taylor, & Jayakody, 1994).

The great migration of 1915 to 1940, which saw the movement of approximately four million African-Americans from the South to the North, influenced the interest in family reunions. McAdoo (1981) describes a process in which an individual from the South would come to a northern city, settle, and then sponsor other relatives and friends as they moved to the city. This process “...ensured that a person who moved to an area was not totally isolated, but was met with an existing supportive network that would give assistance until a niche had been found.” (p.157). As families left

the south in hopes of greater opportunities in the north, some family members were naturally left behind. Many northern African-American's frequently refer to their kin 'down home' with a sense of nostalgia and longing (Auslander, 2002; Stack, 1996). It has been noted that Alex Haley's *Roots* (as well as the television miniseries that followed) may have sparked interest in African-American genealogy (Auslander, 2002; Lund, 2002).

Structure of African-American Reunions

African-American family reunions may involve 2-3 family ancestors and involve blood-related kin and 'fictive kin' (Criswell, 2000-2004; Lund, 2002; Vargas, 1997a, 1997b). African American family reunions may have hundreds of participants (Schnedler, 1996). Frequently lasting approximately 2-3 days, reunions are generally highly organized affairs complete with t-shirts, talent shows, award ceremonies, athletic events, story telling, and occasionally workshops related to social issues such as parenting (Bockman, 2000; Vargas, 1997a, 1997b). Southern families tend to gather annually or semi-annually for reunions (Criswell, 2000-2004).

Eating is always an important element of reunions, but in the South an emphasis on southern food is often present. Some of this emphasis may reflect the nostalgia that some northern African-Americans feel (Auslander, 2002; Criswell, 2000-2004; Stack, 1996). It has been argued that northern African-Americans attempt to rekindle the feeling of home, kin and connectedness by idealizing the South (Auslander, 2002; Stack, 1996). As Stack (1996) notes, "What people are seeking is not so much the home they left behind as a place that they feel they can change, a place in which their lives and strivings will make a difference—a place in which to create a home." (p.199).

Functions of African-American Family Reunions

As previously noted, little empirical work documenting the structure, function or possible outcomes associated with participation in African-American family reunions is available. Table I highlights themes that emerge from newspaper reports, websites, quotes from African-American reunion specialists (most notably Ione Vargas, the founder of the Family Reunion Institute at Temple University), Aschenbrenner's (1975) *Lifelines*, Stack's (1996) work on the return of African-Americans to the rural south, Auslander's (2002) anthropological report and Criswell's (2000-2004) brief reports of his preliminary research.

Table 1: Functions of family reunions – as hypothesized from available literature

<p>Preservation and revival of extended families & the functions of Extended families Opportunities for reconnection and reduction of isolation, 'Rituals of solidarity' that maintain family unity</p> <p>Transmission of identity and values</p> <p>Link between the past and present</p> <p>Celebration and recognition of accomplishments of family members</p> <p>Transference and distribution of family resources (financial, educational, talent) Educational scholarships, travel scholarships, family investments in hometowns, communities and churches and charitable causes, family credit unions, workshops</p> <p>Focus on addressing social problems Theme of survival, empowerment, emphasis on younger generations and provision of role models</p>

Washington (1991) recounts that "...much of what we call family is constructed through memory—what we remember and pass on becomes an essential part of family." (p.7). It is possible that the telling of stories, particularly family stories, may be crucial to African-American families who must contend with histories of slavery, subjugation, oppression and dislocation from one another (Auslander, 2002). This shared history of disconnection of African-American families gives added importance to the need to reconnect – even today (Nelson, 2000). The sharing of experiences and the subsequent reduction of isolation are elements of empowerment.

The fact that it is remarkably difficult to trace family lineage back to Africa (Auslander, 2002) may give added meaning to the importance to reconnect. Given this rupture in the lives of African-Americans it is not surprising that,

"...the wearing of kente or dashiki at an African-American reunion takes on rather different resonance than wearing national dress at, say, a Greek-American, Mexican-American or Korean-American family reunion of celebration. Afrocentric apparel would seem to evoke a particularly triumphant sense of endurance in the face of rupture, a forceful collective identification with those with whom one has been denied the specific affiliations of knowable kinship." (Auslander, 2002, p.13).

Providing such ‘rituals of solidarity’ appears to be essential to the maintenance of family unity among African Americans (Aschenbrenner, 1975; Auslander, 2002; Lund, 2002; Vargus, 1997b). The Family Reunion Institute reports that, “the family reunion acts as a catalyst for carrying out critical extended family functions such as providing a sense of belonging and concern, transmitting a sense of identity and direction and strengthening values.” (Family Reunion Institute, 2001).

The celebration of the accomplishments of family members is often an important element of African American family reunions (Auslander, 2002; Vargus, 1997b). Such celebrations are thought to be particularly important to children. Schnedler (1996) notes that an African-American reunion attendee remarked that during a reunion the extended family operates similarly to the way it would if family members resided in the same town. In such a setting the youth are able to talk to older family members or friends about their problems and are offered ‘real-life’ role models.

Conclusions and Implications

In conclusion, substantial numbers of African Americans engage annually in family reunion activity. It appears that African-American family reunions are highly organized events with numerous types of benefits for participants. Serving as ‘hosts’ for the exchange of resources, reunions may assist individuals, families and communities.

Much can still be learned about the role of African-American family reunions and a review of the literature reveals more questions than answers. For example, if, “African-American reunions are complex ritual arenas through which past adversity is dramatized, toyed with, and ultimately transcended,” (Auslander, 2002, p.23) then how does such transcendence occur? How do reunion attendees interpret participation in these events? What are the geographical differences that impact African-American family reunions? And, ultimately, do reunions strengthen and connect families who must face a history of and current disconnection?

Future research should also address how structural characteristics of family reunions serve to facilitate the transmission of social and human capital and the development of assets among participants and other family members. For example, does the regular, planned coming together of family members serve as an occasion for activating the potential exchange of resources among members? Supporting intrinsic systems of support among disadvantaged groups is a policy and practice priority that has been achieved, for example, with African-American churches (Caldwell, Chatters, Billingsley, & Taylor, 1995; Caldwell, Green, & Billingsley, 1992; Taylor, Luckey, & Smith, 1990). Similar potential exists with reunions. The scant extant research-based literature suggests that despite variation in how African-American family reunions are organized and experienced by participants, there may be common

functions served by the regular, ritualistic gatherings of members of family networks in one place at one time. Although participants frame the reasons for attending mostly in terms of enjoying sharing time with family members and enacting family traditions, potential gains to participants may extend beyond the immediate pleasure of the social interaction. As Laird (1984) notes,

“Family-centered practitioners need to learn how to recognize and understand family rituals, to use the explanatory power of rituals to help understand families, to interpret meanings and functions of rituals in preserving family paradigms, and finally, to learn to employ the ritual form in work with families. Through the medium of ritual, families can be helped to express their traditions and values; to achieve coherence; to adapt to transitions, unsettling life events, and catastrophes; and perhaps to dismantle dysfunctional patterns of rigid behavior that are perpetuated by certain rituals” (p.125).

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